High School Reform

Many who pass state high school graduation tests show up to college unprepared

So what do the exams, now being conducted in classrooms nationwide, actually measure?

by **LUBA OSTASHEVSKY** **February 18, 2016**

Looking back on her junior year at Saint Agnes Academic High School in the College Point neighborhood of Queens, Viktoria Mertiri admits that trigonometry "was the death of me. I never understood it."

But Mertiri scored a 70 on the New York Regents Examination, a state standardized test of core high school subjects. It was a pleasant surprise: five points better than she needed to pass. In geometry, she scored an 85. She also passed the English language arts, U.S. history, global history, and a science Regents — with math, the five exams a student must pass, by law, to graduate from high school in New York State and receive a Regents diploma.

When she arrived at Queensborough Community College, however, Mertiri, who is now 20, did poorly on the entrance tests and was put in remedial classes. In her first year, she had to take remedial English, science, and math — the math class twice since she failed it the first time. The classes earned no credit toward a degree and cost $6,000, which she paid for by working at a physical therapist's office two days a week and babysitting on the weekends.

It's a microcosm of a perplexing situation that contributes to the rising cost and low success rate of higher education nationwide: Students pass state tests that say they're good enough to graduate from high school but colleges consider them unprepared to do higher-level work.

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The dumbfounding reality, said Paul Marchese, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Queensborough, is that, "The New York Department of Education says what a high school graduate needs to know, and then we say what a college student needs to know."

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This story is being repeated across the country. The number of students passing exit tests and graduating from high school is at an all-time high but huge numbers of these graduates turn out to be unprepared for college. Nearly 60 percent of students attending two-year colleges end up in costly and time-consuming remedial courses to strengthen their skills before being let into college-level classes,

according to figures compiled by the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University. Some students, faced with the extra course work and expenses, just give up.

The number of students passing exit tests and graduating from high school is at an all-time high, but nearly 60 percent of students in community colleges need remedial courses before they can take college-level classes.

"There is a disconnect that has existed for a long time in terms of the measures used for high school graduation and if a student is ready to succeed in a college-level class," said Mary Fulton, who has studied this issue as a senior research analyst at the Education Commission of the States, which works with state policymakers on education. "We haven't aligned the curriculum and assessments so that we can be sure that if a student mastered high school material then they're ready for college."

In Massachusetts, for example, a study by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education found that more than a third of high school students who scored "proficient" on the state-required graduation test and enrolled in a Massachusetts public university or college were unprepared enough to be have to take at least one remedial course.

"We need a test to give educators, students and families an honest indication of whether [high school students] are on track to meet postsecondary demands," said Linda Noonan, the alliance's executive director.

It may come as news to students and their parents that passing state-

required tests to graduate from high school doesn't mean they're prepared for college. But it doesn't surprise Russell Rumberger, professor of education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. So-called exit exams, which are administered by many states, he said, "are not designed to assess college readiness, but rather some more basic level of proficiency."

Plus, as Elisabeth Barnett, senior research associate at the Community College Research Center, points out, exit exams are "not done at point of exit. If you take the test in 11th grade, it's still a year away from graduating. It's easy forget quadratic equations in a year."

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Remedial education can be a black hole for college students: Only one in five who has to take them manages to pass into college-level courses. For many, just the prospect of remedial classes is discouraging enough that they drop their college aspirations altogether.

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A quarter of applicants to the City of University of New York who were told they needed remedial courses never registered, for instance, according to research conducted by Drew Allen, associate dean for data analysis at Princeton. And for those who do go through with it, remedial education cost states and the federal government an estimated $7 billion annually in financial aid, a study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found.

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Linda Noonan, executive director, Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education

Mertiri considers herself lucky to have gotten through the remedial classes at Queensborough. She is now enrolled in a four-year college, New York Institute of Technology, where she is taking health and science classes that she hopes will get her into a physical therapy program She looks back on Queensborough as the buffer zone between high school and college.

Some experts are hopeful that high schools will raise standards enough to graduate students who are college-ready. Forty-four states plus the District of Columbia have now adopted the Common Core education standards, in principle to sync up what students learn in high school — and the tests they take to prove it — with what awaits them at the college level.

"This is the reason why Common Core is so important," said Noonan, whose organization has lobbied Massachusetts to switch its existing exit exam to a Common Core-aligned evaluation called the PARCC, or Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers.

Local opposition led the state to decide in November to instead create a new exit test by next year, borrowing elements from both exams.

"It's still unknown what that will be," said Noonan. "The PARCC was the best bet we had to produce students who are college and career ready."

Meanwhile, opposition to the Common Core is being coupled with a broader backlash against standardized tests.

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Anti-testing movements are growing stronger and in some areas as many as 80 percent of students opt out of end-of-year assessments. Mississippi and California have also dropped their high school exit exams in favor of assessing their students based on grades and portfolios. Those are better indicators of future success in college, said Bob Schaeffer, public education director of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing.

The debate over Common Core-aligned tests may soon be moot. Under the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act, states can apply to use college entrance exams to assess high school achievement. So far, Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire have opted to use the SAT for this purpose, and Arkansas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming the ACT. Although this doesn't solve the problem of readiness, states and colleges consider these tests a better gauge of the sort of work incoming students can do.

But while all of this is happening, Alissa Peltzman, vice-president of Achieve — which encourages states to raise high school standards — said the two systems remain far apart in ensuring that someone who manages to graduate from high school is actually ready for college.

"Virtually no state," said Peltzman, "is in a position to insist in the next year that all students hit the college-and-career-ready level of performance" on their high school exit tests.

This story was produced by The Hechinger Report*, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Read more about Common Core and about higher education.*

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